

# ‘Such a song giving voice’: musical effects in Greek tragedy

Susanna Phillippo

A ruthless police inspector, spared by a man he had been pursuing for half his life and having now in turn just let that man escape, sees a lifetime’s values of inflexible justice crumbling. He sings in baffled anguish, ‘I am reaching, but I fall...’, and determines to escape this frightening new world by suicide. But the music, and partly the words, closely echo what the audience heard his antagonist sing some two hours earlier, at a similar moment of spiritual crisis, turning from his old life to a new one. In these ‘crisis arias’, the opposing protagonists of *Les Misérables* – Javert the man of rigid law, Valjean the repentant representative of mercy – are linked through the music they sing, and their experiences and decisions paralleled and contrasted.

A young man is carried on stage, broken and dying. He first chants, and then sings, of his agony and the injustice of his fate, cursed by his father because of his stepmother’s false accusation of rape. But he chants, and begins singing, to the same rhythm as the audience heard that stepmother first chant and then sing, when she too was carried on stage early in the play, close to death, and gave voice to her anguished passion for him, inflicted on her by the goddess Aphrodite as part of her revenge-plot against the young man who had scorned her. In music as in other ways, the two apparently opposite characters of Phaedra and Hippolytus are linked, on her first appearance and his last.

## Imagining the sounds

Imagining what Greek tragedy was like when originally performed involves trying to imagine what it sounded like, as well as how it looked. Music plays an important part in this ‘sound picture’: singing not just by the chorus, but at times, and in ways crucial to the effects of many plays, by the actors themselves. When we first hear Medea, off-stage, in Euripides’ *Medea*, she is almost certainly singing, which heightens the sharp and disconcerting contrast between these wild cries and the lucid, forcefully intelligent speech she delivers when she actually appears on stage. There is much that we don’t know about how exactly this sounded. Not a great deal like *Les Mis.* or even Puccini, certainly, although as I’ve suggested, the way musical passages in Greek tragedy could work have parallels in modern opera and musicals.

We do know that actors’ singing was accompanied by a wind instrument called the *aulos*, a sort of double-oboe, and that this sometimes accompanied rhythmical but spoken chanting as well as actual singing, as when Phaedra first speaks in *Hippolytus*, and when the dying Hippolytus enters at the end. We have indications of what singing and accompaniment may have been like from some papyrus fragments of Euripidean tragedy, dated to the third century B.C. The fragments with decipherable musical notation are from choral passages in the *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*: the ‘melody’ is what is called enharmonic, in modern terms closer to Indian or middle-eastern-style music, using smaller intervals than the standard western classical tones and semi-tones.

## Singing actors

Euripides was especially noted for including singing characters in his plays, but all of the ‘big three’ made substantial use of this. Several characters in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* and Sophocles’ *Antigone* sing. The challenging, virtuoso title role in Sophocles’ *Electra* is also a musical role: it takes 165 lines for the audience to hear her speak in the standard spoken rhythm of tragedy, following extended solo chanting to accompaniment and then a sung duet with the chorus. She also sings in grief at the false news of Orestes’ death, and in joy at their later reunion, underlining the contrast between her strong emotions and the colder caution of her brother, who speaks his lines.

The range and flexibility of voice that were highly prized in actors of Athenian tragedy must, then, in many cases have included the ability to give a convincing singing performance, even in female roles. It is hard to know how far the availability of actors with strong singing abilities – and perhaps, for some female roles, a high ‘countertenor’ range – may have affected the authors’ composition of their plays, but it may well have been a factor. There were stories suggesting that Sophocles wrote at times with an eye to the particular capacities of performers; his *Electra* does look like a play designed with a prominent and multi-talented actor/singer in mind. Several other plays demand accomplished musical performance from at least two of the three actors, and in some cases one actor quite possibly sang in both male and female roles, even across an age gap, like Phaedra and Theseus in *Hippolytus*.

## How to tell where actors sing, and how singing tells

How can we tell when an author intended his actors to sing rather than speak? One indication is the difference in metres – rhythmical patterns – used for sections of actors’ roles; another concerns the spelling of certain of the Greek words. Very often, in the sung sections of Greek tragedy, there is a shift from purely Attic Greek (the dialect spoken in Athens) to a variety coloured by elements of Doric (spoken in Sparta and elsewhere in the Peloponnese). This is particularly noticeable where words usually pronounced with an *eta* change this sound to an *alpha*. This is the reason for thinking that Medea’s off-stage cries are sung rather than just chanted to music (as the Nurse’s lines, in the same rhythm, are): her part is coloured by this ‘lyric alpha’. Similarly, while Phaedra’s part has the same metre throughout her first exchanges with the Nurse, in her three wildest utterances there is a shift to ‘lyric alpha’, which probably indicates a shift from accompanied chanting to singing.

Some key effects can depend on these points. In *Hippolytus*, when Theseus opens and reads his dead wife’s accusing letter, he breaks briefly into song (both an altered metre and the ‘lyric alpha’ are used here):

*The tablet cries out, cries out, insufferable things.  
Where can I escape  
the weight of ills? For I’m gone, ruined,  
since I’ve seen, wretched me, such, such a song giving  
voice in writing  
(877–80 trans. Halleran)*

Theseus’ delivery works with the choice of image: he sings while

he describes the tablet as singing, almost as if he is acting as the tablet's voice. Moreover, the combination of rhythms used for his anguished fury here matches that in the lament for Phaedra's death which the audience heard him sing shortly before: Theseus' singing strengthens the connection between his grief for his wife and the swift, fatal belief and anger which her last letter inspires.

### **Hymns and laments: singing connections in *Hippolytus***

It is worth homing in on some of the effects created by the extensive use of singing in *Hippolytus*: in particular, 'paralleling' effects such as that suggested at the beginning. Hippolytus' part opens with singing: that is how we first hear him, leading a hymn to Artemis. When Phaedra enters, she is first silent, then briefly chants, and finally, as we have seen, breaks into song as her agitation rises. The rhythm and type of song are very different, but this singing by the two principal characters is linked by content: Phaedra's words play with images which certainly recall Hippolytus and reflect her longing for him, but also conjure the attributes of Artemis. In a sense, then, the audience hear two songs concerning the maiden goddess, but from very different perspectives, as if the opening hymn is then transformed into a parody: Phaedra's longing for the life of Artemis' followers is fired by the passion inspired by the rival goddess Aphrodite, and devotion is thus twisted into quite a different emotional shape.

Hippolytus' singing in his first scene is also recalled in his last, as his chanted lament winds up to a song of pain. Here the parallel is both aural and visual. In the first scene Hippolytus addressed and crowned Artemis' statue. Now in the last scene that statue is still there, but is doubled by a living Artemis, who looks on with something of the same remoteness as her statue, as she listens to what her favourite's song of devotion has turned into, and where it has brought him. At the same time, as we have already seen, Hippolytus' final song recalls Phaedra's first, connecting them as common victims of the gods and of each other. The sight and sound of Hippolytus singing in anguish and weakness remind us of the agonized passion inflicted on Phaedra – the consequence of Aphrodite's desire for revenge on him, a passion which represents all he had rejected in Aphrodite – but also of what it led to, Phaedra's choice to bring this ruin upon him.

Greek tragedy may not have had at its disposal the full battery of effects that a West End musical can command. But that its actors could and did sing, and that the tragedians exploited this in their action and designs to both powerful and subtle effect, is a fact well worth remembering. In the effort to recapture what we can of the experience of the original Athenian audiences, we need sounds as well as images playing in our minds; and we need to hear music as well as words giving voice to the writers' conceptions.

*Susanna Phillippo teaches Classics at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, with a particular interest in the influence of Greek tragedy on French literature.*